

"I Do Want to Live!": Female Voices, Male Discourse, and Hollywood Biopics.

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Complicating cherished assumptions about film biography, the fifties, and female spectatorship, *I Want to Live!* finds male filmmakers identifying with a female protagonist in opposition to the male institutions of the media and the law in a work that aligns melodrama with realism.

I Want to Live! (1958), the personal project of veteran independent producer Walter Wanger, who hired Robert Wise to direct, illustrates the problems of recounting the lives of women in the genre of film biography. It also serves as an example, four decades later, of ways to deal with those problems. To put it simply, biography requires a subject, usually someone who has done something noteworthy in the public world. Women historically have not been encouraged to become such subjects, at least not of discourse that patriarchal society takes seriously. Women cannot be consistently posed as the objects of male looks and language and also be the subjects of their own stories. Thus, in ways that vary historically, biopics about female subjects highlight the contradictions between the public positions - positive and negative - women have achieved and the "unladylike" activities that have landed them there.

Not many biographies consciously depict the clash between a well-known woman and the culture's expectations of her. Fewer still critique those expectations. In the interests of realism and of promoting rhetoric against capital punishment, however, *I Want to Live!* takes the side of Barbara Graham (1924-55), a convicted murderer executed in California. In sympathetically telling the story of a woman many felt was railroaded to the gas chamber, the film lines up against systems of male discourse, in this case, the media and the law, by which patriarchy speaks of and for women.

I Want to Live! is a product of the 1950s, when women's film biographies were greatly devalued in comparison to the previous two decades. Until recently, the 1950s have been remembered simplistically as "an affluent era of broad political consensus and cultural conformity,"¹ in which little attention was paid to the tensions and conflicts that marked the era, especially its gender politics. Jackie Byars, one of a number of critics who have reassessed the films of the decade, points out a latent conflict between their dominant ideology and what Alison Jaggar terms "outlaw emotions ... that are incompatible with dominant perceptions and values." To Jaggar, "people who experience conventionally unacceptable, or ... 'outlaw' emotions often are subordinated individuals who pay a disproportionately high price for maintaining the status quo."²

Certainly Barbara Graham paid with her life for her outlaw emotions, which, caught in a cycle of crime since her youth, she acted out in the most literal sense. The law and the media freely equated her illegal activities with her status as "an attractive, red-haired woman," a phrase almost always included in the lead paragraphs of newspaper stories about her.³ Her sexual promiscuity was conflated with her participation in criminal activities, such as robbery, forgery, and perjury, usually associated with men (although her rap sheet also included arrests for prostitution). The combination made it easy to brand her a brazen freak, a negative example to women who lived beyond the boundaries that had been carefully set out in postwar popular culture.

Nonetheless, *I Want to Live!* throws into confusion the good girl/bad girl dialectic that bedevils even the most circumspect studies of gender in fifties film. Indeed, *I Want to Live!* declines to condemn its heroine or to blame her demise on some fatal transgression. It also shows how a nimble and powerful system of law and representation was able to exploit Graham's faults and weaknesses. As the film portrays it, this system transgressed the standards of humanism and fair play held dear in the liberal social problem genre to which the film also belongs.

Susan Hayward plays Graham as a brassy yet dignified woman intent on maintaining her individuality, thereby showing how an actress's ingenuity can give vibrant voice to a victimized character. Equally interesting, the male producer, director, and screenwriters tell this woman's story not by investigating her but by identifying with her, showing how her personal deceptions and misrepresentations were matched and exploited by the larger deceptions of the law and the mass audience misrepresentations of the print and electronic media.

Accordingly, *I Want to Live!* merits study in the context of the biopic as it had developed by the late 1950s, the relation between the film and the actual case on which it is based, the star persona and performance style of Susan Hayward, and the documented motivations of the men (and they were virtually all men) who made the film. Finally, this essay will offer a textual analysis of the film as drama and as rhetoric, an account of its reception, and some observations about its relevance to filmmakers who tell women's stories.

Women and Biography. There has been considerable scholarship on literary biography but little on biography in film. Such critics as Carolyn Heilbrun and Linda Wagner-Martin have explored the reasons why at all times there are many fewer biographies in print of women than of men, a disparity also found in the cinema. Wagner-Martin finds that "the writing of women's lives is problematic in part because few women have had the kind of success that attracts notice. Women's biography is most often based on private events because few women ... live public lives." Heilbrun says that when successful women write their autobiographies they almost invariably downplay their ambition and initiative, traits unbecoming to women in our culture. Such drives are usually transferred to male associates, making success appear to be a gift a woman never wanted for herself or a happenstance that was fallen onto by near accident.⁴

In *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, the only major study of a misunderstood genre and a survey of biography up to 1960, George Custen finds that female biopic subjects in the thirties were often queens, corresponding to the star status of the actresses who played them.⁵ These royal women were born to their greatness; thus, the films avoid issues of ambition. The queen's power to command was usually seen to conflict with women's

emotional, romantic, dependent natures. The classical biopic continued, through the 1950s and its period of transition from the studio system, to celebrate, mostly unproblematically, the achievements of male subjects. Female biopics, however, found conflict and tragedy in a woman's success. A victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and a non-traumatic personal life. Early deaths were preferable to long lives. This principle turned into a convention that for the most part still holds true today. Thus, films were made about Lillian Roth (Hayward in *I'll Cry Tomorrow*), not Lillian Gish; Frances Farmer (Jessica Lange in *Frances*), not Katharine Hepburn; Dian Fossey (Sigourney Weaver in *Gorillas in the Mist*), not Margaret Mead; Billie Holiday (Diana Ross in *Lady Sings the Blues*), not Ella Fitzgerald.

The trajectory of victimization and suffering began to dominate women's biography after World War II, when female monarchs became outnumbered by entertainers, especially singers, who lived hard lives. This shift in focus can be attributed to two large-scale phenomena. One was the distinct misogyny of much postwar popular culture, as the division between the man's world of work informed by his war experience and the woman's life as mother and "homemaker" in the newly developed suburbs drew the genders ever farther apart.⁶ The other phenomenon was the collapse of the Hollywood studio system and the mass audience for movies. One of the consequences of the latter was a decline in the importance to the industry of female audiences and female stars.⁷

Around the end of the 1950s, around the very time (1960) that Custen declares the biopic lost its importance, a significant change started occurring. While Custen is correct that there were fewer biopics after 1960, those that were made were often more probing of their subjects, more interested in differing points of view, and more interested in demystification than the biopics of the 1930s and 1940s. Films such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Freud* (both 1962) show the influence of *Citizen Kane*, which received a major rerelease in 1956 after more than a decade out of general circulation. *Kane* was ruled out of Custen's study because it is a professed fictionalization of a famous person. Nonetheless, Orson Welles and Herman Mankiewicz undoubtedly had the biopic in their sights. *Kane* has all the earmarks of the genre, from the larger-than-life "Great Man" of posterity to the brilliant young hero whose vision sweeps aside the feeble protests of those less intrepid and the loyal same-sex sidekick who serves as a kind of helpmate. *Kane* injected differing subjectivities into a genre that had tried to maintain a unitary point of view toward its protagonists.

I Want to Live! obtains most of its freshness from the tension between postwar-style realism and thirties-era female star glamour and its contradictory pulls toward documentary and melodrama. Like *Kane*, however, the film tries, albeit not very hard, to leave doubts about its largely sympathetic heroine. As in *Kane*, the "official story" is told with skepticism, as given out by *Kane's* empire and the "News on the March" newsreel in Welles's film. *I Want to Live!* all but depicts a potent conspiracy between the law and the press. Although I do not want to press the well-known point that director Robert Wise had been one of the two editors of *Citizen Kane*, *I Want to Live!* includes one out-and-out quotation from *Kane*. A shot of a newspaper composing room shows two alternate headlines being prepared to announce Graham's conviction or her acquittal, recalling the famous election-night sequence following *Kane's* disastrous campaign for governor. But unlike *Citizen Kane*, which demonstrates how the Great Man objectified every

person with whom he came into contact, thereby turning its subject into an object of speculation, mystery, and myriad subjective opinions, *I Want to Live!* does exactly the opposite: it emphasizes the complex humanity of a woman whom the press caricatured in her own time.

A Woman's Story, Male Filmmakers. Susan Hayward won an Academy Award for *I Want to Live!* on her fifth nomination in twelve years. All of those five films for which she was nominated were melodramas built around her, as opposed to adventure-romances, such as *David and Bathsheba* (1951), *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952), and *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), which paired her with male stars. Of the Oscar-nominated films, the last three were biopics. Four, moreover, had first-person titles: *My Foolish Heart* (1949), *With a Song in My Heart* (1952), *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955), and *I Want to Live!* Although all of these titles indicate the protagonist's ownership of her story, each title also includes a key word, such as "heart" or "cry," that suggests "feminine" emotionalism. These titles speak of self-pity or emotional, irrational choices (*My Foolish Heart*) or repression (*I'll Cry Tomorrow*).

The pronoun "I" in a title often connotes a sincere testimonial, a personal confession. It is no accident that when O. J. Simpson, accused of murder, published an exculpatory apologia, it was entitled *I Want to Tell You*. Alone among the Hayward titles, *I Want to Live!* with its assertive, exclamatory demand, could easily have announced the story of a man. This speaker shouts her "want" simply and unmistakably, with no hint of self-pity or hesitation. There is no implied Freudian figure wondering what this woman wants; her desire is un-mysterious and basic. This is the story of a woman, Barbara Graham, who, in a yellow journalism tradition, was a completely spoken subject. She had been named, defined, and determined by an interlocking system of law, language, imagery, and public opinion. Thus, this title introduces a tension that the film will develop between the heroine, who claims possession of her desire and her story, and the cultural and institutional systems that determined her fate.

Graham, a prostitute, a shill for a robber and a gambler, and a convicted perjurer, was found guilty, along with two men, Emmett Perkins and John Santo, of the fatal March 1953 pistol whipping of a sixty-two-year-old Burbank, California, woman, Mabel Monahan. A fourth member of the gang, John True, turned state's evidence and testified against the trio. He claimed that Graham, whom the press dubbed "Bloody Babs," committed the killing. The three were put to death at San Quentin prison in June 1955, following several stays of execution that the film faithfully recounts.

Many close observers of the case, led by Ed Montgomery, a Pulitzer Prizewinning reporter whose stories for the San Francisco Examiner largely formed the basis of the film, questioned the guilty verdict. Graham's conviction was obtained partly on pre-Miranda police procedures that included entrapment.⁸ She was not read her rights, informed of the charge against her during interrogation, or allowed a phone call. The court-appointed defense was underfunded and inept; although investigators determined that Monahan's killer was right-handed and True testified that Graham beat her repeatedly with her right hand, the defense failed to point out that Graham was left-handed, as those working on her appeal discovered too late. Many suspected that Perkins and Santo pinned the killing on Graham in the belief that the state would not execute a woman and would spare their lives along with hers. The letter from Graham to her appeal attorney, Al Matthews, from which the film's title comes, expressed what many involved in her final months

saw as a maturation and spiritual conversion. She wrote to Matthews on March 8, 1955, "Do you believe there is any hope at all on the commutation, Al? I would appreciate your honest opinion, bad or good. Remember how I felt about one at the beginning? I have changed now. Life does seem very dear to me. I do want to live."⁹

I Want to Live! appears to adopt the rhetoric of the real Al Matthews, who was interviewed in a documentary-style promotional trailer for the movie. Matthews says of Graham's trial: "At all times, methods were used to invade her mind, to seduce her body, in effect, to wash her out as a human being."¹⁰ These were the sentiments of a defense attorney who sympathized with his client in order to argue her case. Coincidentally or not, they also sound like a feminist attack on an institution - be it the law, the media, or the cinema - that stereotypes, objectifies, and dehumanizes women.

Matthews's next comment summed up the experience of Graham as a universal example: "I felt if they could do those things to Barbara Graham, and get away with it, they could do it to each one of us. I felt that justice was being abandoned."¹¹ Thus, Matthews took identification with the "invasion" and "seduction" of Barbara Graham out of the realm of gender and generalized it to "each one of us." Nonetheless, both those involved in the case and the filmmakers assumed gender specificity as a given; in a March 1957 letter to Hayward early in the film's planning, producer Walter Wanger wrote, "The more I read, and the more I hear, the more certain I am that this will be the greatest film ever shot to end capital punishment and the public believing everything it reads about the people apprehended by the law, especially women."¹²

The phenomenon of male filmmakers in a presumptively sexist era identifying with a woman who was victimized through means that could be called spectacularly invasive, or invasively spectacular, stemmed from the film's producer. Walter Wanger was known in the thirties and forties for paying lip service to the power of film to effect progressive social change. He was also personally committed to the studio era tradition of the charismatic female star; his films included *Queen Christina* (1933), with Greta Garbo, and *Joan of Arc* (1948), with Ingrid Bergman. His career ended with the notoriously out-of-control production of *Cleopatra* (1963), a project Wanger initiated as a unit producer for an adrift, post-Zanuck-era Twentieth Century-Fox.

In a confluence of events almost too contradictory to conjure with, Wanger served time in prison in 1952 following his "passion shooting" of a man he suspected of being his wife's lover. Although double standards abounded in the case, all of them redounding to Wanger's benefit, the producer apparently identified with Barbara Graham's ordeal as a woman in the hands of the legal system. Detractors were quick to accuse Wanger of an ulterior motive in making the film, because of the parallels he apparently found between his and Barbara Graham's run-ins with California law and punishment in the early fifties. In December 1951, upon finding that his wife of eleven years, the actress Joan Bennett, was having an affair with her agent, Jennings Lang, Wanger trailed Bennett and Lang to a restaurant parking lot, where he shot Lang, inflicting a minor wound to the groin. It mattered little that Wanger was apparently a compulsive philanderer who had been unfaithful to Bennett far more than she had been to him. In a classic case of double standards, Bennett's film career was destroyed by the publicity, while Wanger, after serving three months and nine days of a four-month jail sentence, was able to rebuild his career. Studio heads and fellow producers rallied to Wanger's support in a show of concern not extended to

those suspected of having Communist Party affiliations. In fact, Wanger, who was involved in many leftist causes in the 1930s, ironically was let off the hook politically by the scandal over the shooting, which took place in the midst of the House Committee on Un-American Activities' destructive second round of Hollywood hearings in 1951-52.¹³

A socially conscious filmmaker and president of the Motion Picture Academy in the early 1940s, Wanger had long made pronouncements on the cultural importance of film that were not often matched by the films he produced. Upon his release from jail in September 1952, however, he told the press that the prison system was "the nation's number one scandal. I want to do a film about it."¹⁴ *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954, directed by Don Siegel), a taut, earnest thriller made at the lowbudget studio Monogram (renamed Allied Artists in 1952), fit the bill and helped Wanger rehabilitate his reputation. *I Want to Live!*, which received six Oscar nominations, capped his comeback and confirmed his return to class-A filmmaking.

As Richard Maltby and Ian Craven argue, Hollywood's need to satisfy a wide audience and to avoid criticism and reaction from governments and interest groups has caused it to avoid broad critiques of systemic social problems.¹⁵ However, Wanger and his collaborators saw the need to distinguish their look at Barbara Graham from that of the media and the law enforcement officials at her trial. One newspaper account of her execution, for example, read as follows: "Barbara achieved a strange beauty in her last moments. Her soft, brown hair was perfectly in place. Her face was an ivory cameo, lightened by the mask and her rouged, crimson lips.... She wore a beige wool suit with covered buttons, pumps, gold pendant earrings and an engagement ring and wedding band."¹⁶

In taking the point of view of the woman who was subjected to such scrutiny and to lurid, even morbid, fascination with her "femininity," the male filmmakers were forced to turn a jaundiced eye on the patriarchal systems that objectified Barbara Graham. As an example of a mid-1950s social problem drama in Great Britain, Marcia Landy considers a Diana Dors vehicle, *Yield to the Night* (1956), inspired by the sensational Ruth Ellis murder case in Britain. In that film the depiction of an ultrafeminine prisoner and her masculinized female captors adheres to gender typing.¹⁷ For Barbara Graham, however, it was such typing itself that helped condemn her and the filmmakers critique it.

The topic of capital punishment confronts filmmakers with a rhetorical stance more radical than that of most social problems for the simple reason that to tackle the death penalty is to take on American law. Jackie Byars, echoing Michael Wood, argues that "all social problems are treated the same way in these films... The problem can be named and social institutions are created to cope with it."¹⁸ With the death penalty, however, the social institution itself is the problem. It is conventional wisdom that although Hollywood may single out corrupt or misguided individuals within a system, it leaves the system unscathed. *I Want to Live!* takes exactly the opposite tack: individuals within the system are at best kindly and well-meaning and at worst nondescript functionaries "just doing their jobs." It is the system itself that defames, humiliates, and kills.

Furthermore, to attack capital punishment is to confront public attitudes that keep the practice going. This involves what Joseph L. Mankiewicz disdainfully called "making 'the public' the heavy"; the filmmakers debated the extent to which the public's lurid fascination and desire for

retribution would be confronted. Some forties "problem films," particularly those against bigotry, such as *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), did openly prod audiences to examine their own attitudes. Mankiewicz emphasized to Wanger, however, that "no film has ever succeeded in making 'the public' the heavy. Because 'the public' is the jury. And they won't return a verdict of guilty."¹⁹

Nonetheless, Graham's arrest is played as a kind of mass peep show, with dozens of onlookers, most of them male, hoping to get a glimpse of the infamous woman as she is clapped in irons. Her response is to come into the street like a famous actress (Susan Hayward?) dramatically appearing on stage, clasping her baby's toy tiger (the "tiger lady") as if it were an Oscar. The headline in the next day's paper could just as easily read, "Promising Newcomer Makes Strong Debut." Graham's behavior, and Hayward's performance, are responses to the excessive attention that Graham received as a woman. Putting on a red nightgown for her last night before her execution, Graham says, "Can't disappoint my public: 'Bloody Babs spent her last night decked out in pajamas of her favorite color, flaming scarlet.' That's what they call red when I wear it." The depiction of the execution scene, with a horde of fifty onlookers, all of them middle-aged men, crowding into the room, surrounding the gas chamber, and staring through the windows like men watching a strip tease, reinforces the point, as does Graham's final request for a mask: "I don't want to look at people. I don't want to see them staring at me."

This mode of critique leads Wanger and Wise to adopt a "realistic" style by means of which people and places are depicted in the realm of the semiotic "real," outside signification, however impossible that is to achieve. The review in *Variety* called this approach, where the actors were concerned, "casting for character rather than for type."²⁰ Wanger termed the style "adult realism." He memoed Mankiewicz, whose production company, Figaro, produced the film, "It should be as far from the Hollywood pattern as possible ... semi-documentary, episodic, realistic, emotional, powerful, no usual construction, no characters going all the way through, no expensive cast of names except Susan."²¹

Almost any time a Hollywood production tries for realism, there is likely to be tension between a deglamorized *mise-en-scène* and the artificiality of the performance styles and narrative conventions.²² The film begins and ends with written statements by reporter Ed Montgomery attesting to its "factual" nature (these briefly threaten to be the words of a man claiming ownership of the story). The prison sets were modeled closely after Graham's quarters at Corona Women's Prison and San Quentin penitentiary. TV newsmen George Putnam and Bill Stout reenacted their roles as reporters at Graham's trial. The film was shot in black-and-white gray-scale cinematography, creating the effect of natural light, rather than traditional Hollywood three-point glamour lighting. Wanger, Wise, Hayward, and screenwriters Don Mankiewicz and Nelson Gidding interviewed everyone connected with the case who would talk to them, from the priest who administered last rites to Graham to the nurse who attended her during her last night at San Quentin. Most realistic of all are the film's last forty minutes, in which the preparations of the gas chamber for execution are simply and painstakingly detailed; this was Robert Wise's contribution near the end of preproduction, after he interviewed San Quentin personnel.²³

The earnest attempt to re-create the world Graham moved through "as it really was" yields some interesting results. Viewers today may be struck by the large number of women shown in

workaday jobs (as prison orderlies, nurses, guards, and administrators, and even as reporters and undercover cops), although no attempt is made to characterize these women in any particular way. Clearly, this reflects the actual numbers of women in the workforce in the fifties, but it collides with the mistaken impression now, and to some extent then, that all women of the era were June Cleaver-style homemakers. It also makes clear that, although women populate the system, it is run by and for men, a point made obvious by the absence of women at Graham's execution and by the fact that Graham regards men as her chief accusers and executioners. (She addresses her sardonic post sentencing remarks to "the gentlemen of the press.")

The film's publicity materials took pains to point out that even Hayward's wardrobe and makeup were exactly as Graham wore them:

Mrs. Graham's taste in clothes is also reflected in Susan Hayward's costumes. The four time Oscar nominee long ago proved in *I'll Cry Tomorrow* and *Smash-Up* that she was not one of those misled stars who insist on perfect hairdos and beautiful clothes despite the contrary demands of a script. It should nonetheless be pointed out, for the benefit of those whose skepticism of Hollywood claims to accuracy is not easily allayed, that the handsome wardrobe and meticulous grooming displayed by Miss Hayward in the film only serve to heighten the fidelity of her portrayal. Attorney Al Matthews recalls not infrequent hour-long waits while his client prepared her make-up.²⁴

A critic such as George Custen might counter that this is exactly what makes the material a suitable star vehicle. Indeed, for all its elements of authenticity, which are considerable, the film remains what Mankiewicz told Wanger would be "a magnificent tour-de-force for a female star."²⁵ In Wanger's scheme of a realistic film outside signification, the only character who is plainly a sign is Graham herself, a star amid "real people." The film struggles to delineate her as a vital, complicated person chafing under the gender stereotypes that the culture, especially the press, has forced her into. Susan Hayward employs performance codes that collide not only with stereotypes of the dangerous, transgressive woman but also with expectations of how a beaten, trampled-upon victim would act. A spectator might see Graham, and the film about her, as somehow victorious over systems that aim to take away her dignity, "to wash her out as a human being." Thus, Hayward's ferocious performance is the key to the film's indirect rhetorical thrust against the death penalty. Hayward, more than the male filmmakers, is Graham's speaking subject, the one who articulates her and gives her life.

Graham Meets Hayward: Star Persona, Character, Performance. Custen maintains that under the studio system, which in various ways shaped Wanger, Hayward, Wise, and Mankiewicz, biopic subjects were shaped to fit star personae.²⁶ Hayward's fitness for the genre typifies this tendency. "All of Hayward's impersonations," he writes, "were headstrong, colorful women, marked in some way by tragedy. And, as this was one of Hayward's characteristics-she suffered with sublime intensity-the biopic was a niche into which her talents could be fitted."²⁷ Hayward's ferocious and active demeanor in *I Want to Live!* is a far cry, however, from the demure and passive though tenacious women of *I'll Cry Tomorrow* and *With a Song in My Heart*.

Susan Hayward, born Edythe Marrenner in Brooklyn in 1917, began working as a New York advertising model just after graduating from high school and also took acting classes. After

Hayward and her modeling agency were featured in a 1937 Saturday Evening Post story entitled "A Day in the Life of a Model," Kay Brown, of the New York office of Selznick International Pictures, contacted her. There she was interviewed by George Cukor, who arranged for a screen test in Hollywood.²⁸ Although the test did not lead to a contract with Selznick, the young actress resolved to stay in Hollywood. Eventually she was signed to a six month option at Warner Bros., where her name was changed. As a contract player at Paramount from 1938 to 1945, Hayward drew mostly thankless supporting roles and leads in undistinguished B films. At the end of her contract, she was signed by Walter Wanger's independent company and attained stardom playing strong-willed heroines in several western- and southern-themed outdoor melodramas, including Canyon Passage (1946), Tap Roots (1948), and Tulsa (1949).²⁹ She earned her first Oscar nomination in one of Wanger's works of "adult realism," Smash Up: The Story of a Woman (1947), in which she played an alcoholic. Wanger sold her contract to Twentieth Century-Fox in 1949, and there she continued to make large-scale films, in which she played the love interest, as well as "grittier" melodramas and biopics.

Throughout her run as a major star, from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, Hayward was portrayed in publicity and in press reports as both a stunning and glamorous former model and a no-nonsense, hard-driving "girl from Brooklyn," as she characterized herself. Press stories, from early in her career until her death from cancer in 1975, recounted her progress from modeling in New York to her attainment of star status after years of hard work. Her New York Times obituary, by Lawrence Van Gelder, noted:

To sketch her life in swift scenes would be to create a catalogue of events that seem like clichés culled from a thousand movies: the lucky break that started her modeling career; the director [George Cukor] who saw her picture in a magazine and offered her a screen test; a rejection for the role of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*; hard times in Hollywood and a bicycle accident that cast her onto the lawn of an agent who changed her name to Susan Hayward; the starlet routine with cheesecake stills but no roles; the gutsy appeal to a convention of distributors that set her career rolling; stardom; Academy Award nominations; an Oscar; public triumph but personal tragedy—an unhappy marriage; a custody battle over twin sons; divorce; attempted suicide; a taste of scandal; a second, apparently happy marriage; her husband's death; and the final years, marred by illness.³⁰

Press reports did not downplay her strong-willed ambition, since it complemented the myth of the raw street kid from Brooklyn, the underdog borough. Fellow Brooklynite Barbara Stanwyck, a major star while Hayward was still a teenager, was similarly mythologized; a 1959 post-Oscar story in the New York Times compared Hayward's win after four unsuccessful tries to the fortunes of the long-struggling Brooklyn Dodgers.³¹ Ambition also fit the stereotype of the "feisty redhead." A typical article, published in *Colliers* in 1951, was headlined "Unlazy Susan. You have only to look at Susan Hayward's fiery hair to know how she achieved success in Hollywood. She fought, and fought fiercely. And now that she's at the top, she works furiously to stay there."³²

Moreover, for years, Hayward, as well as sympathetic Hollywood columnists, prepared the public for the complex, not always likable roles that she aimed to play. A columnist in 1943 observed that probably no actress in Hollywood history has ever taken such a stubborn (and

successful) stand about the parts she wants to play. Susan is young, beautiful, and talented, and yet she will have no part of the routine sweet and sticky characterizations the average star insists upon. Her studio bosses gaze upon her admiringly-and fail to understand. As a result, the Hayward career... has been nothing short of turbulent. One suspension has followed another at Paramount. When it comes to turning down roles and getting layoffs, she is the female George Raft. This is strange, indeed, when the Hayward chips are counted. Every role she has selected has turned into a scintillating triumph. The few she has accepted against her better judgment have proved duds.³³

In satisfying what Richard Dyer has cited as the public desire to discern the "real person" beyond the layers of imagery that attend film acting and stardom, press coverage of Hayward delighted in her plain-spokenness, which, like much of the rest of her behavior, was contrasted against some straw woman of a vain, pretentious Hollywood star. "It's wonderful to be a movie star," she told columnist Earl Wilson in 1950, "being able to buy the toys for your children that you could never have." "You can't say those things," Wilson replied. "The other movie stars will ostracize you."³⁴ Articles emphasized her hard work, her immersion in character, and her punctuality despite illness or injury. Moreover, articles emphasized her similarities to the "ordinary" moviegoer-that she often made her own clothes as well as the draperies in her home; her love, after she married a man outside show business, Georgia businessman Eaton Chalkley in 1957, of living in the small town of Carrollton, Georgia. An article, during the run of *I Want to Live!*, even described her slipping into the back of a theater showing the film to lose herself in the movie and become "a weeping fan."³⁵

Moreover, the two biopics, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, which opened nationally in January 1956, and *I Want to Live!*, received as career peaks, appeared to emerge from highly publicized events in Haywards life in the mid-1950s, namely, her contentious 1954 divorce and custody proceedings against her first husband, Jess Barker, after nine years of marriage and in April 1955 an unexplained suicide attempt. *I'll Cry Tomorrow* also seemed to come out of the cauldron of her tempestuous personal life; Hayward began work on the film three days after her release from the hospital following a near-overdose.³⁶ The film, about a Hollywood actress's descent into the depths of alcoholism, was based on the life of early-1930s film musical actress Lillian Roth, whose tell-all autobiography was optioned for filming soon after its publication. The public's knowledge of Hayward's overdose and hospitalization, which were page-one news around the country, formed part of the background against which audiences saw the Roth biography. *I Want to Live!*, by contrast, was viewed against the calmer backdrop of Hayward's marriage to Chalkley, her residence in the exurbs of Atlanta, and what some press reports took to be her semiretirement.³⁷

Thus, her performance as Barbara Graham, the dignified petty criminal, was perfect for a star who, like many, embodied both the glamorous and the ordinary. A story on her fight with brain cancer, which ran some seven months after her death, began: "Susan Hayward's best movie, *I Want to Live!*, captured her fascinating emotional mix. She managed to be as formidable as she was sexy, as courageous as she was abused, and as cold-blooded as she was hot-tempered."³⁸

Hayward plays Graham in a regal, larger-than-life manner, as if Garbo's Queen Christina or Gréer Garson's Madame Curie turned up as a petty crook in 1950s California. There is a decided

lack of naturalism in Hayward's performance, which, although it contrasts with the film's "realism," seems part of a careful strategy worked out with Wanger and Wise and prepared for in the screenplay. Graham was conceived in the mold of the thirties biopic heroine in order to capitalize on the incongruity that would result. This design can be seen in a complaint Wanger made about an early draft of the script:

The characterization of the girl is not Barbara Graham - definitely not the character that was sold to Susan Hayward through what she read and the people she talked to. Barbara Graham was not a hysterical "thing," but a woman who could carry off, whether she was acting or not, a great scene, with dignity, much to the embarrassment of the people who thought they could break her down. Even the night she left Corona to be executed at San Quentin, she sat in the Cadillac as it drew her out of Corona with her head high, like Queen Elizabeth going to her coronation.³⁹

Hayward plays Graham with self-conscious panache, making her not a masochistic, passive object to whom things happen but a humiliated figure who nevertheless plays the great lady with determination. This is what makes the performance unusual and the film that features it not just another 1950s biopic about a victimized woman on a downward slide. As Graham, Hayward's movements look studied and deliberate, as if the character were thinking out every move before she makes it. Is it Hayward or Graham who physically mimes cool, frustration, defiance, hopelessness, or joy as if she were modeling expressions and stances from the late-nineteenth-century manuals for actors of François Delsarte? She does not hesitate to fling herself about at moments of despair. Graham/Hayward's eyes flare with defiance, especially toward the end of the film when Graham, ironically, appears to inhabit a space all her own the more her execution nears. Her eyes light up brightly and coquettishly at those moments when Graham is lying to herself, and they turn dead and steely when Graham is resigned or discouraged. Hayward's voice is a versatile instrument, feathery and kittenish at times, gravelly, guttural, and brassy at others. As with the body and the face, the impression is not just that the character is speaking but that the actress is using her voice, choosing the right timbre, volume, and tone in the same way a cinematographer chooses the lens and lights that he/she needs for a given shot. Of course, all performers do this. The difference is that, in keeping with the so-called invisible style of classical cinema, the traditional Hollywood performance effaces these codes by means of naturalism.

Hayward portrays these complications and this poignancy by making an inspired choice, especially in a film that prides itself on realism: she foregrounds melodrama. Melodrama would seem the opposite of realism and the social problem drama. They are often aligned, however, in the class-conscious Manichaean oppositions of rich and poor, good and evil, weak and strong, to which both forms gravitate. It is this alliance that moves Marcia Landy to call the social problem drama "a conduit through which melodramatic affect flows."⁴⁰

Melodrama, with its excessive significations of good and evil, would seem to be what tips the film away from an even-handed treatment that would leave Graham's guilt or innocence undetermined and toward an assumption of innocence. Christine Gledhill writes in her essay on the connections between melodramatic traditions, acting, and the institution of movie stardom that "notoriously, the production of melodramatic identities involves excess of expression: hyperbolic emotions, high flown sentiments, declamatory speech."⁴¹ Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* writes that "melodramatic good and evil are highly personalized...

Most notably, evil is villainy; it is a swarthy, cape-enveloped man with a deep voice." Gledhill elaborates, "moral forces are expressions of personality, externalized in a character's physical being, in gesture, dress and above all in action."⁴²

The changes Hayward rings on these principles, and the ambiguity of her performance, dwell in her enactment of several moral forces in turn: she is at various times the heroine in distress (the beaten wife, harassed suspect, entrapped defendant, death-row convict "tortured" by endless stays of execution), the villainess who ties herself to the railroad tracks (the compulsive liar, the amoral person who won't take responsibility), and the hero who saves the day (the tough woman who won't let hostile men touch her, who won't break down during a police "third degree," who insists on her way in the most institutional circumstances, playing jazz and wearing negligees in prison, simply to keep her own identity). The actress's performance denotes masculine traits as well as the expected feminine and thus does much to deflect "Babs" as the object of the gaze that she is constantly being made into.

F(Law)ed Defendant. The filmmakers set out to depict Graham as a manyfaceted person, almost in defiance of the virgin/whore types on which 1950s Hollywood sometimes traded. In an interview in which Wanger refused to rule on Graham's guilt or innocence, he enumerated a catalog of her contradictory and "fascinating" traits: "She was a bright girl, a stupid girl, a sexually attractive girl, a feminine girl. She had a wonderful heart. She was also a pathological liar. She had good taste in books and music. She was a good mother and, sometimes, not a good mother. She had a sense of humor that never left her to her dying moments."⁴³ The producer reels off a list of characterizations that individually may sound like sexist judgments, many of them typical of things said about Graham during her trial. Juxtaposed, however, they amount to a refusal to define her as any one thing, an allowance that she was a person and people are complicated, rather than that women are incoherent.

Furthermore, Matthew Bernstein's definitive biography of Wanger takes as its basis a career and life that were "full of contradictions," as the producer's contemporary detractors were often quick to point out.⁴⁴ The film's refusal to jump to conclusions about Graham, as the public did during her trial and the culture does about women in general, may show again Wanger's unconscious tendency, if not eagerness, to identify with his wronged heroine. In any event, women in fifties culture rarely were permitted this range of contradictory traits.

The film softens Graham somewhat to ease sympathy for her, cutting the number of her children from three to one and eliminating her alleged drug abuse, while emphasizing the addiction of her last husband, Henry Graham. For the most part, however, the film confronts her amorality, especially in the opening sequences. We see that she habitually lies; while at a party with sailors in San Diego, she blithely tells a young man that she can't spend a weekend with him because her mother, who abandoned her when she was young, wants Graham to go with her on her yacht.

This sets up the following scene, in which she agrees to testify falsely in the trial of two friends indicted for armed robbery. She makes the decision with an imaginary roll of the dice, letting chance appear to choose her course. Then she returns to the party, dancing herself into a joyful frenzy; the spectator is invited to experience the jouissance that blinds Graham to her own denial of moral responsibility. To show that Graham herself chooses "the wrong fork in the road of

life," as a TV journalist melodramatically puts it much later, the film offers for contrast her friend Pat ("Peg" in the film), who refuses to commit perjury for the unsavory characters Graham sees as "nice guys." Pat/Peg "cuts out," leaving the shady life, only to resurface much later after Graham's indictment for murder. By this time she has gone straight, gotten married, and had two children. Pat/Peg's presence in the film (Wanger and the screenwriters interviewed the real woman) suggests that Graham had choices that she did not take and that some women know how to make them by turning their backs on the life of crime and making it on their own.

The film also shows that those choices were never clear to Graham. After all, she later announces that she's leaving a life of crime to get married (not because crime is wrong but because "it's not fun anymore"). She tells Perkins that she's quitting "the life" to become one of the housewives she sees in the supermarket, "a square." But the man she marries is a bartender she meets when he warns her that she's about to pass a bad check to a plainclothes cop. Her new husband helps her continue her life of crime, while his drug habit later guarantees that she will have to further it, throwing her back into the company of Emmett Perkins, for whom she earlier shilled, served as lookout during robberies, and drove the getaway car.

The life of "squares"-a world of love, family, work, citizenship, and, presumably, good men whom women can count on-is one that Barbara vainly wants (when Peg reintroduces herself to Barbara, she says proudly, "I'm a real square"). However, she neither swears off her criminal life of unreliable, exploitative men nor seems to know how to. Furthermore, the film is confused about whether the men on the right side of the tracks are any better for women than criminals and junkies. From the beginning, Graham is shown with cheating men who have photos in their wallets of wives, kids, and houses with white picket fences. When a radio is turned on during Graham's last night, a newsman announces the suspension of a male high school coach on a morals charge. The nurse who keeps a vigil with Graham the night before the execution says that she's serving her husband with divorce papers for desertion: "Separated, divorced-the way men are these days that's the only way you can live with 'em." In addition, the film depicts the bonds Graham forms with women from the "square" world, such as her friend Peg and the San Quentin nurse, who is also named Barbara.

Nonetheless, the film hangs much of its sympathy on Graham's respect and desire for love and family. The scene in which she enters the film establishes her in all her contradictions. After a slow crane up to a hotel window, there is a cut to the side of a bed in a dark room; the camera is just above the bed, facing the window. Suddenly, the figure of Graham/Hayward springs into the shot. Back lit, she lights a cigarette and, shaking herself with post coital happiness, hands it to the person next to her. Wearing a slip, she runs to the foot of the bed, draws up the covers, and playfully claws at the still unseen bedmate like a cat. Cut to the room slightly later, as Graham and her now visible lover are dressing. A cut to the hallway finds a hotel clerk pointing out the room to a vice cop. Back inside the room, Graham looks in her companion's wallet and sees a snapshot of the man and his wife and two children shown outside a white frame house. The man takes the wallet from her and they embrace. Just then, the plainclothes officer comes in as the woman instinctively rushes into the bathroom and locks the door. The cop knocks on the bathroom door, Graham opens it, stands with authority, and asks unconvincingly, "What are you two gentlemen doing in my room?" The officer is about to charge the man with violating the Mann Act, when Graham informs him that she brought the man to the room, as a prostitute

would a customer. The man looks at her wonderingly, as the cop grabs her roughly to get her moving. "Get your paws off. I soil easy," she tells him while taking the time to tie a scarf jauntily around her neck. As she leaves in the policeman's custody, she hands the wallet, open to the picture, to the man. "Don't lose this," she tells him, smiling. Realizing that she has turned herself in to keep him from scandal and probably save his marriage and good name, he says, "You know, life's a funny thing." Graham turns and asks, "Compared to what?"

This scene accomplishes several things that resonate through the film. First, Graham enters the frame; the camera does not seek her out as an object. This establishes her as an active presence in her own story. Next, she's not a hypocrite. The film suggests that her "John" is a supposedly solid citizen having a fling with a woman in a neighboring state. (The previous scene in a "hip" jazz club showed sugar daddies in late middle age "slumming" with very young women.) She is ready to take the consequences, however - "I've been there before. It's a misdemeanor, no federal rap" - but not before trying to lie her way out of it. Although the action of the scene has her submitting to authority, her surrender plays as a victory. Just as she enters the scene actively, claiming her sexual pleasure as her own-not as male desire projected onto her-so she refuses to be manhandled or rushed. She even sets the terms of her arrest. In losing, she appears to win, an impression maintained throughout the film and a total reversal of the convention of other female biopics in which success gives way to suffering.

Her answer to the man's dime-store philosophizing-life is funny "compared to what?"-indicates that she improvises her way through life in another parallel with jazz. She takes what comes, a trait that puts her in a position both active and passive. The film clearly expects her to have moral groundings, however, and not simply to get those from men or from the cultural system. In the lengthy and powerful sequence depicting Graham's last night, when sympathy for her is at its height, she reverts to form and tells Nurse Barbara an outrageous lie about her "wonderful" husband Henry and how she selflessly left him, sacrificing her happiness to protect his position at "a very big bank." Not only does this story sound like the plot of the sort of "woman's picture" many critics might classify this film with, but it reminds the spectator that Graham is not an "ordinary woman." There is still some doubt that died with her, not in relation to male standards but to other women, a point made as the scene ends on Nurse Barbara, who clearly stores the incident away mentally, not knowing what to make of it.

Whatever Graham's responsibility for her fate, the law is continually shown as the force waiting to snatch her with its teeth when she falls and to help her fall if that suits its purpose. This is seen, for instance, in Wise's clever match cut from a bongo drum at the San Diego party to a gavel stand on a judge's bench as Graham is sentenced for perjury. It is also shown very dramatically in the sequence in which Graham is entrapped. In the film's sequence of events, Barbara is visited by Peg soon after the murder indictment. She laments her own failure to see where her life of crime could lead: "All the stuff I read, but I could never read the handwriting on the wall."

This is apparent self-knowledge, but it plays more like the habit of a compulsive liar who tells his/her listeners what they probably want to hear. It is soon belied when her court-appointed lawyer tells her that, since she can't find her husband, who might corroborate her claim that she was with him the night of the Monahan murder, she has no chance of acquittal. Given what we

know of her character, this almost guarantees that she'll do something desperate to get an alibi and then claim she had no choice. After talking to a fellow inmate who, it turns out, has made a bargain with police for a suspended sentence, Barbara makes the first step toward arranging the false alibi. As the scene ends, she walks past "the handwriting on the wall," in the form of a sign that warns, "Keep healthy. Stay clean." She doesn't learn from her earlier perjury conviction. Her amorality, clearly set out at the start, shows itself again. She even rolls the dice once more after having compared herself to "the little ball bouncing around a roulette wheel, everyone betting on me to land where it's going to do them the most good-votes for the D.A., circulation for the newspapers, promotions for the cops."

It's the law, however, that is stealthy, underhanded, coy, and ultimately inscrutable. The law's alliance with an inmate serving time for manslaughter in order to provide the prosecution with an airtight case resembles Barbara's shilling for criminals and resorting to dishonesty in her defense. The difference, as the film makes clear, is that the legal system has power, means, justification, and credibility—all of which are denied to the woman in the sight of the law.

If the law has the power to accuse and judge the woman, the media have the power to characterize and prejudge her. If Barbara fantasizes her life as if it's a Barbara Stanwyck "woman's picture," the reporter Ed Montgomery, as he's portrayed at the beginning, has read too much hard-boiled detective fiction. To him, Graham is a femme fatale, one of the "angel-pusses who'd shoot their grandmothers in the back and take bets on which way they'll fall." At the moment when Graham is being questioned without knowing the charge, Montgomery pronounces his verdict, based on the "type": "It's Mrs. Graham's tough luck to be young, attractive, belligerent, immoral, and guilty as hell." His dubbing her "the tiger woman" is shown as infinitely ironic. The toy tiger that she carries becomes a complex symbol of her inner life. To her, it is a reminder of the little boy she's left behind; to Montgomery and the press, it represents female danger and depravity easily sold to a fearful public. Moreover, the film's failure to explain Montgomery's conversion from being convinced of her guilt to believing in her innocence serves to shift the focus away from Graham as a site of mystery and inconclusiveness. No doubt the filmmakers had to take the newspaperman's change of heart as a given, since he wasn't offering any explanations. The result is that Montgomery himself becomes an object of mystery. A letter from Graham read in voice-over expresses this: "I don't know what's making him change toward me in his old age, but he sure seems to have."

Moreover, Montgomery's conversion is not presented as a great gift for which the recipient should be grateful; instead, both protagonist and film seem to regard it as too little, too late. When the reporter tries to accompany some bad news about Graham's appeal with an apology to her for his reportage of her trial, she won't let him finish, turning her back with the line, "What a sendoff you're giving me. Everything but confetti." Up to the end, Graham takes the newspaperman's benevolence with a touch of cynicism. Told that he will be keeping an executive vigil outside the cells of Perkins and Santo in the hope that one of them will make a statement clearing her, she snorts, "An exclusive statement, no doubt."

The film's last scene, in which Matthews meets Montgomery outside San Quentin with a letter from Graham thanking him, has the effect of giving Graham/Hayward, in voice-over, what are literally the film's last words. This would seem an example of what Kaja Silverman, in *The*

Acoustic Mirror, calls the "contained" written voice-over, the woman's voice that is at a man's beck and call and can as easily be discarded or silenced (if he chooses not to read it) as it can be activated.⁴⁵ *I Want to Live!* uses the voice-over, however, to reinsert Graham pointedly into a space from which she has been forcibly removed. The effect is intensified when Montgomery turns off his hearing aid, tuning out the clamor of the traffic jam caused by the men who came to view Graham's death as they rush to get on with their busy, destructive lives. This effective muting of the scene indicates Montgomery's and the film's choice of Barbara's voice over that of the world that condemned her. Furthermore, after seeing Graham's visual image being claimed, defined, and misinterpreted, the audience hears her disembodied voice as the authority of her objective self, which cannot be misconstrued or taken away.

Tension between Rhetorical Argument and Narrative Conventions. The rhetoric of those convinced of Barbara Graham's innocence of murder or who were opposed to her execution was adopted by Wanger and the screenwriters and reflected in the film. Wanger wrote to then California attorney general Edmund G. "Pat" Brown in May 1957, "I was very happy that you are as enthusiastic as I am about the Barbara Graham picture and I believe it can be of great service, especially in the interests of abolishing capital punishment, although I assure you I am not going to make it a preachment."⁴⁶ These might seem the words of a producer eager to impress a public official with his earnestness. Such sentiments might make *I Want to Live!* seem a relatively rare specimen of Hollywood rhetoric, a form whose purpose is openly to make an overt argument and to lead the audience to consider its point of view.⁴⁷ For a film to be rhetorical, it needs to reach out beyond its diegetic confines and engage the audience with a particular sociopolitical purpose in mind, a task to which Hollywood's narrative traditions and institutional pressures are notably resistant. By this definition then, there are few truly rhetorical Hollywood films—*Dr. Strangelove*, *Dirty Harry*, *Boyz n the Hood*, *JFK*, and *Bulworth*. A rhetorical film from the 1950s, that politically paranoid and nervously safe decade of anti-Communism and blacklists when, as one standard history puts it, "films directly critical of American institutions, such as the 'problem pictures' and semidocumentary melodramas so popular in the immediate postwar years, could no longer be made,"⁴⁸ might seem a particular rarity. However, "social problem" films resurfaced, beginning in 1957, as the Red Scare began to abate, after the Production Code underwent in 1956 its first formal loosening since it was drafted in 1930, and as filmmakers began to enjoy the benefits of the 1952 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Burstyn v. Wilson*, which finally granted films constitutional freedoms of expression.⁴⁹

Before the film's release, Wanger acknowledged the problem of simultaneously pleasing critics who expect Hollywood films to water down social issues and avoiding giving offense to other audiences:

We ... want recognition in the classification of the great pictures like *Snake Pit* [1948, about mental illness], *Lost Weekend* [1945, about alcoholism], and *Johnny Belinda* [1948, about a blind woman and the discrimination she encounters]. To arrive in this category today is more difficult than when those pictures were made[;] consequently, we must establish our research and authenticity and appeal to the so-called "Intelligentsia," especially the critics who are always looking for a chance to say "Well, they meant well but didn't quite make it."⁵⁰

The confusion about whether to take a stand, however, is shown in the ambivalence toward Grahams guilt or innocence. On the fourth day of shooting, Wanger memoed Wise, "Are we going overboard in saying that Barbara Graham was innocent? Wouldn't it be smarter if we could get in some of the confusion that existed at the time of the trial, and some of the confusion that still exists, and, rather than trying to prove her innocent, try to prove that she should not have been killed with so much doubt about?"⁵¹ This ambivalence doesn't play in the finished film, which does not show the murder and indicates it occurred only by showing a heap of rolled-up newspapers with headlines about the beating piled on the front porch of a house from which Graham is about to be evicted. Moreover, the film is breathtaking in its lack of concern for the murder victim, who seems a structuring absence throughout; there are no grieving relatives, nothing to get in the way of a spectator's sympathy for Graham. The film adopts a narrative strategy in which new information is shown only when Graham learns it or, as in the police stakeout, before she does. This effectively suggests her innocence and establishes audience identification with her.

Although the film had a mostly positive critical reception, Time's review asked, "Is [the film] a sermon on the wages of sin? Not really. The heroine, according to the script, is not punished for something she did but for something she did not do. Is it an attack on the practice of capital punishment? Possibly. But the film spends no sympathy on the two men who meet the same fate as she does."⁵² The impression that the film presumes Graham's innocence persists decades later. In a New York Times survey of capital punishment movies preceding the release of *Dead Man Walking* (1995), Stephanie Goldberg calls *I Want to Live!* "the quintessential death-penalty picture," the best example of "films about innocent people on death row."⁵³ Therefore, although the film does not shy away from showing the agony of the execution process, it cannot be said to argue against it but rather to demonstrate its horror. The filmmakers' desire to make an anti-death penalty film cannot quite be reconciled with narrative conventions concerning sympathetic characters. Sidestepped is the question of whether convicted killers, who the filmmakers would probably assume are usually guilty, should be put to death.

As the film demonstrates, Graham may not have been guilty of murder. "Bloody Babs," "the tiger lady," was referred to in newspaper accounts as simply "Barbara" and never without reference to her appearance and her sexuality (inseparable in this case at this time from her gender). What she was guilty of beyond a reasonable doubt was a violation of the norms of femininity. What is equally profound is that male filmmakers have told her story not by investigating her but by identifying with her and by seeing the specific ways in which her femininity, made synonymous with her criminality, rendered her an object of invasion and dehumanization by the media and the law. This is done by means of specific cinematic codes and an aggressive star performance and is motivated by the desire to tip public opinion against capital punishment, and to do it within the diegetic confines of Hollywood narrative film. The film's release in Los Angeles three weeks after the election of anti-death penalty Democrat Edmund G. "Pat" Brown as governor of California was opportune.

For all this, *I Want to Live!* should not be regarded as an amazing anomaly. It should instead be seen as evidence that with awareness and effort male filmmakers can tell a female protagonist's story without forcing it into patriarchal structures, and that there can be more complexity to the

subset of biography that we could call the fallen woman biopic than simply a formula of victimization.

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Figures and Notes



Figure 1. Barbara Graham arrives at the Corona Women's Prison. Courtesy Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison.



Figure 2. Susan Hayward as Barbara Graham compared to the actual Barbara Graham in a United Artists publicity shot. Courtesy Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison.

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Notes

1. Leerom Medovoi, "Democracy, Capitalism, and American Literature: The Cold War Construction of J. D. Salinger's Paperback Hero," in Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 255.

2. Quoted in Jackie Byars, "The Prime of Miss Em Novak: Struggling over the Feminine in the Star Image," in Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties*, 200.

3. References to the lurid trial coverage are prominent in the psychological profile of Graham prepared for Wanger by Marcel Frym, a criminologist at the University of Southern California. Frym condemned "the part that the newspapers played in conditioning public opinion. It is amazing that, under [the] law of our land, this type of unbridled, incendiary writing during and pending trial is possible and considered compatible with a basic sense of fairness." Marcel Frym, J.D., "Lost Woman," n.d. (circa 1957), 8, Walter Wanger Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. Everett DeBaun, a research assistant assigned to screenwriter Don Mankiewicz, analyzed the process whereby "journalistic alchemy had transformed [Graham] from an unhappy young mother who sometimes slept with men for money and occasionally passed bad checks into Bloody Babs, The Blonde Tigress, the moving spirit of a gang of super-crooks." Memo, Everett DeBaun to Walter Wanger, November 27, 1957, 5, Wanger Collection. Ed Montgomery, the reporter who turned mysteriously from Graham's chief accuser to her great defender, in his story treatment for the film, referred indirectly to his own role in painting Graham as "the girl the papers said would do anything . . . fornication, mayhem and murder ... for a few dollars." Ed Montgomery, "Barbara Graham," n.d. (circa April 1957), 9, Wanger Collection.

4. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 7; Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988), 23-26.

5. George Custen, *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 102-7.

6. In an era rooted in Cold War fears of Communism and atomic terror, "her" sometimes seemed conflated with the many "thems" being demonized. In both cases, containment was deemed best. Historian Elaine Tyler May writes, "Hollywood's professed advocacy of gender equality [in the 1920s and 1930s] evaporated during the forties. . . . After the war, as subservient homemakers moved into center stage, emancipated heroines gave way to predatory female villains"; see *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 67.

7. The importance of female audiences to Hollywood during the studio era probably cannot be overstated. A 1939 audience research study by Margaret Thorp, *America at the Movies*, found that the core audience for movies, at a time when some eighty million tickets were sold weekly in the United States, consisted of "primarily middle-class whites between the ages of fourteen and forty-five, the most important segment of which was the 'average citizen's wife' who set the tone for the majority of American movies." In Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), 2. See also Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing* (London: Routledge, 1994). Viewing the decline from the late forties to the midsixties of the female star as institution, one feels that the industry must have

regarded strong actresses as antiquated relics of the studio system, as sadly useless as studio-owned theater chains. "Stardom" came to be memorialized as feminine vanity raised to monumental heights. This notion actually formed the basis of one of the best-known early fifties films, *Sunset Boulevard*, its twenties glamour queen gone mad-a perfect allegory for a time when the studios were letting contracts lapse with the stars they created. The anachronistic identification of stardom with femininity is persistent, as shown in the segment of the 1995 PBS series *American Cinema* devoted to stars. Its examples were Joan Crawford and Julia Roberts, in defiance of the fact that the last woman to occupy the number-one spot in the annual Quigley Poll ranking of box-office stars was Julie Andrews in 1966.

8. The film changed some of the names either to protect the innocent or to prevent the hostile from suing. In a bizarre piece of retrospective irony, the policeman who caught the indicted Graham trying to frame a phony alibi, and whose work would not have been possible if Graham had been advised of her rights to silence and an attorney, was renamed "Officer Miranda," eight years before the 1966 Supreme Court decision.

9. Letter, Barbara Graham to Al Matthews, March 8, 1955, Wanger Collection.

10. Interview, Al Matthews, in "Special Trailer" for *I Want to Live!* filmed July 1, 1958, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Madison.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Letter, Walter Wanger to Mrs. Eaton Chalkley (Susan Hayward), March 12, 1957, Wanger Collection. The day after Hayward won her Oscar, Wanger wrote to lawyer Abraham Bienstock, "Sindlinger [a pollster for the film industry] made a big thing this week of the fact that the reason the motion picture business was better was because there were more pictures appealing to women than there had been in the last five years. . . . and amongst the top pictures he mentioned was *I Want to Live!* which interested me doubly . . . because he mentioned it, and because-during the making and preparation-everybody was so concerned that the women couldn't stand it. Which only goes to prove what you and I have known for a long time-women can stand a helluva lot more than men can. But don't quote me." Letter, April 7, 1959, Wanger Collection, ellipses in original.

13. See Matthew Bernstein, *Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 273-78.

14. *Ibid.*, 281.

15. Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 361-62.

16. Gale Cook, "Barbara, Perkins, Santo Die; Woman 'Tortured,'" *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 4, 1955, 1.

17. Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 203-4.

18. Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 115.

19. Letter, Joseph L. Mankiewicz to Walter Wanger, August 27, 1957, 3-4, Wanger Collection.

20. "Powe.," rev. of *I Want to Live!*, *Variety*, October 29, 1958.

21. Letter, Walter Wanger to Joseph L. Mankiewicz, October 29, 1957, Wanger Collection.

22. The film is still famous for its jazz score, written by Johnny Mandel and played by such noted jazzmen as Gerry Mulligan and Shelly Manne. The jazz was understood, in the fifties, as reflecting the dangerous but exciting nightlife in which Graham lived. Indeed, the jazz typifies

the film's tendency to equate the lifestyle of the Beat Generation with criminality; hence, the frequent use of the beat term "square" to apply to law-abiding folk.

23. Bernstein, Wanger, 332-33.

24. Press release, *I Want to Live!* United Artists Publicity Dept., n.d. (circa November 1958), Wanger Collection.

25. Letter, Joseph L. Mankiewicz to Walter Wanger, August 27, 1957, Wanger Collection.

26. See Custen, *Bio/pics*, 45-47, 193-205.

27. *Ibid.*, 66.

28. It was part of Haywards star legend that she had gone to Hollywood to audition for Cukor, or Selznick, or both for the role of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, preparations for which were well under way in December 1937, when the test took place. However, Cukor told one of Hayward's biographers, Beverly Linet, circa 1980: "We never really thought of her for Scarlett. She was very young and not too experienced, in fact, completely inexperienced. It would have been stupid to get a twentyyear-old girl to play a most demanding part. We thought, David thought, 'This girl may have some possibilities. Let's bring her out here and use her for tests and put her under contract.'" The Scarlett O'Hara legend grew also from the fact that Hayward did play Scarlett in the audition. see Beverly Linet, *Susan Hayward: Portrait of a Survivor* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 34-41. Hayward became typed at Paramount in faux-Scarlett "headstrong bitch" roles (Linet, *Hayward*, 74-75); thus, her subsequent star image as the fiery, obstinate redhead seemed cast from the Scarlett O'Hara mold. Indeed, her reputation as a GWTW reject may well have been an obstacle as Hayward moved into mature roles in the late 1940s and 1950s. Finally, her marriage to Eaton Chalkley, from 1957 until his death in 1966, inevitably evoked the Scarlett O'Hara "angle." One column during production of *I Want to Live!* called her the "Brooklyn 'bonfire' who flunked the admittance test to Tara for *Gone with the Wind* but who was destined 20 years later to become mistress of her own southern 'plantation.'" Erskine Johnson, "Susan Hayward Has Found Happiness in the Deep South," n.d. (circa April 1958), Wanger Collection.

29. See Bernstein, Wanger, chap. 13.

30. Lawrence Van Gelder, "A Life Like the Movies," *New York Times*, March 15, 1975.

31. "She Wanted to Win," *New York Times*, April 8, 1959.

32. Thomas Wood, "Unlazy Susan," *Colliers*, August 18, 1951, 20.

33. Harold Heffernan, "Susan Hayward Determined to Dodge 'Sweet Girl' Career," *Detroit News*, July 25, 1943.

34. Earl Wilson, "Susan Hayward Pulls a Switch," *Detroit Free Press*, October 9, 1950.

35. Harold Heffernan, "Susan Cries at Own Film (Just Like Other Movie Fans)," *Detroit News*, February 8, 1959.

36. Linet, *Hayward*, 191.

37. Johnson, "Hayward Has Found Happiness."

38. Frank Greve, "Susan Hayward's Fight for Life," *Detroit Free Press*, October 12, 1975.

39. Letter, Walter Wanger to Joseph L. Manldewicz, November 22, 1957, Wanger Collection.

40. Landy, *Cinematic Uses of History*, 195.

41. Christine Gledhill, "Signs of Melodrama," in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1991), 212.

42. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, new prefaced ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 16; Gledhill, "Signs of Melodrama," 210.

43. Dorothy Manners, "Wanger Betting-on a Murderess!" *Los Angeles Examiner*, August 10, 1958.
44. Bernstein, Wanger, xiii.
45. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 57-58.
46. Letter, Walter Wanger to Edmund G. Brown, May 31, 1957, Wanger Collection.
47. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's explanation of film rhetoric in *Film Art: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 139-41.
48. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3d ed. (New York: Norton, 1996), 461.
49. Many film historians have noted the retreat of social commentary in the early- and mid-fifties into genres such as science fiction, the western, and the family melodrama. However, the 1957-60 cycle of social comment films has a direct topicality not seen since the Italian neorealist-inspired Hollywood films of the late forties. Some late fifties films that took public issues and institutions as at least a starting point for their dramas included *A Face in the Crowd* (1957, on politics and television), *Twelve Angry Men* (1957, on the jury system), *Paths of Glory* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (both 1957 antiwar films), *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959, both on racial relations), *On the Beach* (1959, on nuclear destruction), *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959, on the manipulability of the legal system), *Blue Denim* (1959, on teenage pregnancy and abortion), *Elmer Gantry* (1960, on religious charlatans), and *Inherit the Wind* (1960, on religion and the teaching of evolution). *Compulsion*, another anti-capital punishment film, based on a hit novel and play by Meyer Levin (who fictionalized the sensational Leopold and Loeb murder case of 1924), was released five months after *I Want to Live!* in April 1959. Much more a "preachment" than Wanger's film, *Compulsion* climaxes with an impassioned speech against the death penalty by the defense attorney, Clarence Darrow (Orson Welles). But although it deals with defendants who are clearly guilty, it has never been remembered in the way that the gas chamber sequence in *I Want to Live!* still is. Perhaps there is something to be said for the effect of visual exposition over verbal bombast.
50. Letter, Walter Wanger to Max E. Youngstein of United Artists, July 9, 1958, Wanger Collection.
51. Memo, Walter Wanger to Robert Wise, March 27, 1958, Wanger Collection.
52. Rev. of *I Want to Live!* *Time*, November 24, 1958, 94.
53. Stephanie Goldberg, "Walking the Last Mile, on Film," *New York Times*, December 24, 1995.